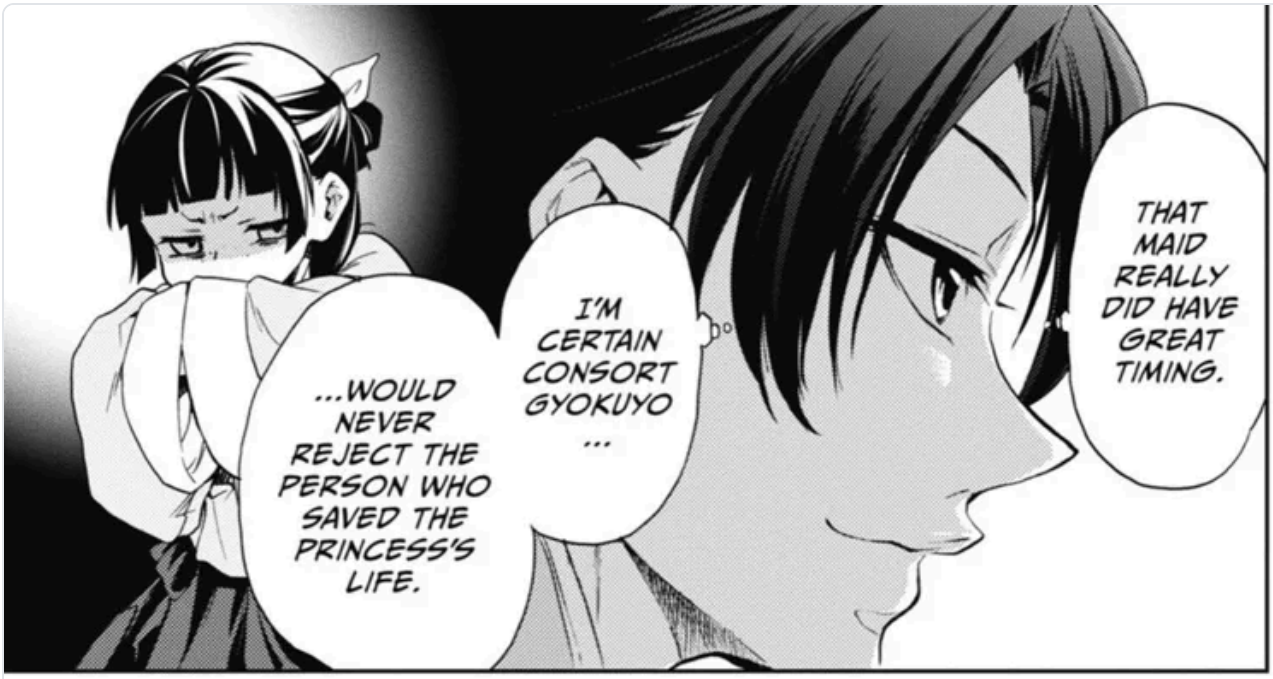
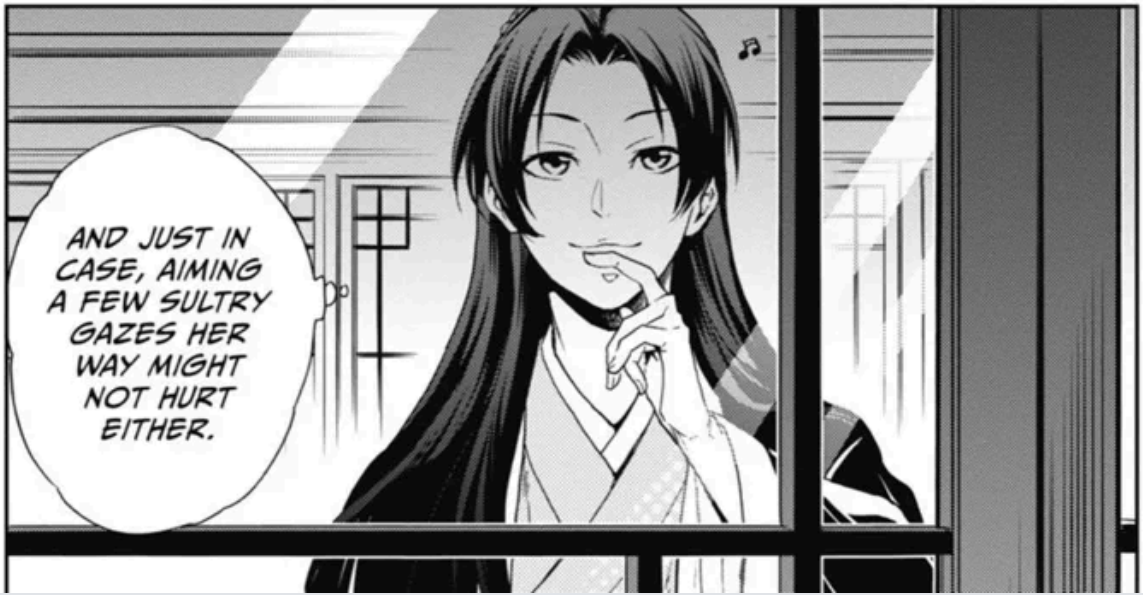
Chapter 2
NOT JUST ANYONE CAN BE EMPLOYED AS ONE OF HER ATTEN-DANTS.
SHE IS ALSO WISE AND CAUTIOUS.
CONSORT GYOKUYO HAS A BRIGHT, GENTLE PERSON-ALITY.
...OR ELSE NO MATTER HOW MANY LIVES SHE HAS, THEY WOULD NEVER BE ENOUGH.
...MUST BE GREATLY WARY OF THOSE AROUND HER...
THE FAVORITE OF THE EMPEROR ...

CONSORT GYOKUYO CURRENTLY HAS FOUR LADIES-IN-WAITING.
BY CONTRAST, CONSORT LIHUA HAS OVER TEN.
THUS, CONSORT GYOKUYO IS RATHER LACKING IN ATTENDANTS FOR SOME-ONE OF SO HIGH A RANK.
AS THINGS STAND, IT'S HARD FOR HER TO OWN THE DIGNITY OF HER STATION.
I'D BEEN HOPING TO ASSIGN HER AT LEAST ONE MORE ATTENDANT...


THAT MAID REALLY DID HAVE GREAT TIMING.
I'M CERTAIN CONSORT GYOKUYO ...
...WOULD NEVER REJECT THE PERSON WHO SAVED THE PRINCESS'S LIFE.

AFTER ALL...
...HOW COULD I FAIL TO PUT THAT FRECKLE-FACE AND HER POISON EXPERTISE TO WORK?
IF SHE ATTEMPTS TO USE THAT KNOW-HOW FOR ILL...
...I'LL JUST HAVE TO HERD HER INTO A POST WHERE SUCH KNOWL-EDGE WILL BE USELESS.


AND JUST IN CASE, AIMING A FEW SULTRY GAZES HER WAY MIGHT NOT HURT EITHER.

Chapter 2 The Mad Scientist

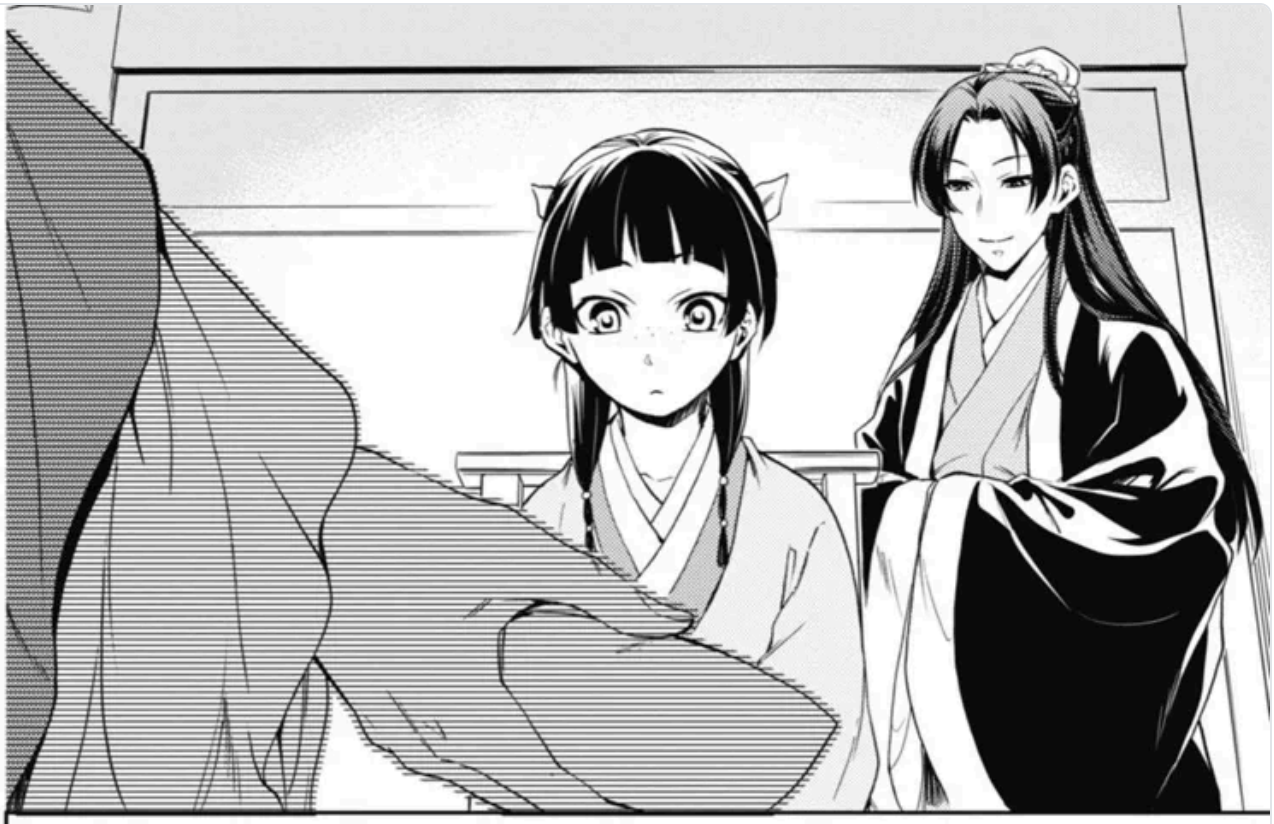
PHEW!
GWAH!
...TO TELL THE TRUTH, I'M JUST HAPPY I CAN GET UP WITHOUT ACCIDENTALLY STEPPING ON THE OTHER MAIDS.
... BUT ...
...TO SHARE MY GOOD FORTUNE WITH THE FLESH MERCHANTS WHO KIDNAPPED ME...
I'M LOATH...
FWUMP
I'VE NOW GOT PRIVATE QUARTERS WITH A BED AND EVERY-THING.
I REALLY HAVE MOVED UP IN THE WORLD.
STILL ...
WHAT EXACTLY IS IT THE ATTENDANTS AT THE JADE PALACE WANT ME TO DO?

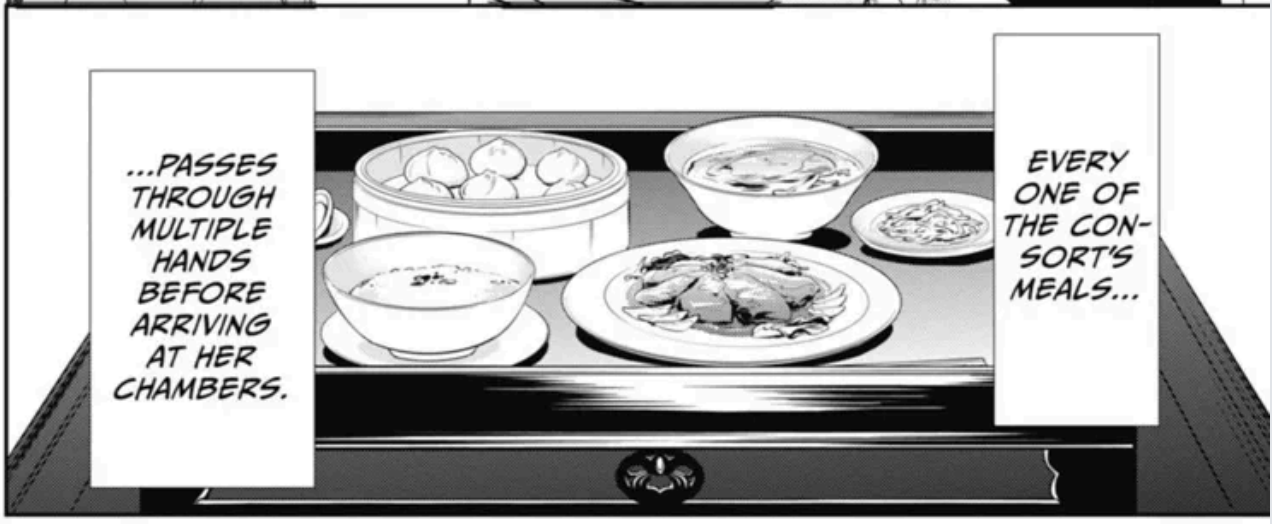
A FEW HOURS EARLIER
EX-CUSE ME...
I'VE FINISHED PUTTING AWAY MY THINGS, SO...
...WHAT CAN I HELP WITH?
OH!
IT'S FINE! DON'T YOU WORRY ABOUT A THING.
WE ALREADY HAD IT ALL HANDLED BEFORE YOU CAME ALONG ANYWAY.
PUSH
PUSH PUSH
PUSH
YOU JUST GO BACK TO YOUR ROOM NOW.
AND HERE.
SOME LEFTOVER SWEETS FROM TEA EARLIER...
YOU CAN HAVE THEM.
54

.....
...I JUST CAN'T SEEM TO SETTLE IN.
パタン
SHUT
THE ATTENDANTS AT THE JADE PALACE ARE ALL HARD WORKERS.
THEY EVEN CLEAN THE ROOMS THAT OTHER SPECIALIZED MAIDS ARE SUPPOSED TO COME CLEAN.
AND THEY DO THIS ALL BY THEM-SELVES, JUST THE FOUR OF THEM.

WHEN I THINK ABOUT IT...
...CONSORT GYOKUYO WASN'T WEARING ANY FACE POWDER DURING THAT CONFRON-TATION.
THE WET NURSE MUST'VE BEEN THE ONE USING IT HERE IN THE JADE PALACE.
ALSO, WITH THE PRINCESS STARTING ON SOLID FOOD...
...ONE OF THE WET NURSES WAS LET GO, I'M TOLD.
THEN THERE'S THAT LOOK SHE GAVE ME...
IT SEEMS MY JOB AS A NEWCOMER IS SIMPLY TO EAT. THAT'S IT.
...BUT THAT EXPRES-SION...
...SO I WASN'T EXPECTING TO BE WELCOMED WITH WARMTH AND SMILES ...
I KNOW ONLY A SELECT FEW GET TO WORK HERE, TO BEGIN WITH...

IT WAS FULL OF PITY.
... WHY ...?
CHIRP チュン
CHIRP チュン




...PASSES THROUGH MULTIPLE HANDS BEFORE ARRIVING AT HER CHAMBERS.
EVERY ONE OF THE CON-SORT'S MEALS...

...THERE'S ALWAYS A CHANCE THAT SOMEONE HAS ATTEMPTED TO POISON HER FOOD ALONG THE WAY.
SINCE SHE'S THE EMPER-OR'S FAVOR-ITE...

ON ONE OCCASION, THE FOOD TASTER SURVIVED A MINOR ILLNESS.
ON THE OTHER, THE TASTER EXPERIENCED NERVE DAMAGE AND PERMANENT PARALYSIS IN HER ARMS AND LEGS.
WHEN SHE WAS PREGNANT WITH THE PRINCESS ...
...I'M TOLD TWO SUCH ATTEMPTS WERE MADE ON HER LIFE.
THE CROWN PRINCE'S DEMISE MUST HAVE EVERYONE ON EDGE.
SINCE I'VE COME HERE SPECIFICALLY TO BE A FOOD TASTER...
...OF COURSE THEY'D SEE ME AS A PAWN WHO WON'T BE HERE LONG.
NO WONDER THEY TURN THOSE PITYING GAZES ON ME.

...AND THEN THERE'S THIS GUY.
SMILE
...WHY IN THE WORLD IS...
...HE LOOKING AT ME WITH THAT SMILE ON HIS FACE?
HE REALLY DOES HAVE FAR TOO MUCH FREE TIME.
HEH.
THAT SHOULD DO IT FOR THE COME-HITHER LOOKS.
60

ANY-WAY...
...IF POISON IS SUCH A GRAVE CONCERN, THEY REALLY OUGHT TO LOOK INTO USING SILVER DISHES.
NO ABNOR-MALITIES IN COLOR...
SNIFF
NO OFF ODORS ...
NO NUMBING SENSATION EITHER...

もぐ
MUNCH
MUNCH
もぐ
BADUMP
ドキ
BADUMP
ドキ
BADUMP
ドキ
BADUMP
ドキ
BADUMP
ドキ
CLANK

PH
I BELIEVE THIS IS SAFE TO EAT.
EW...
PLUS ...
SNIFF SNIFF
...BUT THERE'S NO POINT IN HAVING A FOOD TASTER FOR THE SLOW-ACTING KIND.
IT'S ONE THING IF IT'S A FAST-ACTING POISON ...
TRY THIS NEXT.
OKAY.
...BY TESTING VARIOUS THINGS ON MY ARM.
...WHEN I STILL LIVED AT HOME, I'D ALWAYS BE EXPERI-MENTING...

CHOMP
SPOTS FROM EXPERIMENTING WITH A SALVE
BRUISES FOR POULTICE TESTING
BURN TO TEST A BURN OINTMENT
BLEMISH FROM EXPERIMENTING WITH AN ANTIBIOTIC OINTMENT
SCARS FROM GETTING BITTEN BY A POISONOUS SNAKE ON PURPOSE
...SHE TRULY IS A MAD SCIEN-TIST.
HEE! HEE! HEE! HEE! HEE! HEE! HEE!
...SO THE TRUTH IS, I'M NOT TERRIBLY SUITABLE FOR THIS WORK.
I SLOWLY BUILT UP A TOLER-ANCE TO POISONS ...

BUT IN A WAY, I LUCKED OUT WITH THIS JOB ASSIGN-MENT.
HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE!
?
SH-SHE'S LAUGHING ...

HAAH...
I WOULD SUGGEST DISHES OF SILVER BE USED FROM NOW ON.
HEAD LADY-IN-WAITING HONGNIANG
HM?
IT'S JUST AS JINSHI SAID.
WE PURPOSELY AVOIDED USING SILVER THIS TIME, YOU SEE.
SO IT WAS ALL A PART OF HIS SCHEME...
URGH!
66

YOU WOULD HAVE BEEN COMPENSATED FAR MORE GENEROUSLY HAD YOU LET IT BE KNOWN...
...THAT NOT ONLY CAN YOU READ, BUT THAT YOU ALSO POSSESS SUCH EXPER-TISE.
YES, I AM AN APOTHECARY BY TRADE.
YOU REALLY DO SEEM TO KNOW MUCH ABOUT POISONS AND MEDICINES.
...SO WHAT YOU'RE SAYING IS...
THE IDEA THAT MY KIDNAPPERS ARE STILL GETTING A PORTION OF MY PAY...
...MAKES MY BLOOD BOIL JUST THINKING ABOUT IT.
I WAS ABDUCTED AND BROUGHT HERE.
...YOU DON'T WANT TO GIVE THEM DRINKING MONEY EVEN IF IT MEANS POORER PAY FOR YOURSELF, YES?

...?
TAKE THIS.
WHAT'S THIS FOR?
WELL, THE INCOMPETENT AMONG US ARE LET GO AFTER TWO YEARS OF SERVICE.
!
FWIP
ぱっ
WHUNK
ガ
OH, DEAR ME!
CRACK

MY, BUT THIS JUG IS QUITE EXPEN-SIVE.
YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO PAY THIS BACK ON YOUR WAGES ALONE.
NOW, NOT ONLY WILL YOU BE UNABLE TO SEND MONEY BACK TO YOUR FAMILY...
WHAT'S WORSE, WE'LL PROBABLY HAVE TO BILL YOU FOR THIS AS WELL.
!
...I HUMBLY APOLO-GIZE FOR MY CLUMSI-NESS.
PLEASE DEDUCT THE COST FROM THE AMOUNT SENT BACK.
AND IF THAT'S NOT ENOUGH, TAKE IT OUT OF WHAT I RECEIVE TOO.
VERY WELL.
I'LL MAKE THE ARRANGE-MENTS RIGHT AWAY.
OH, AND...

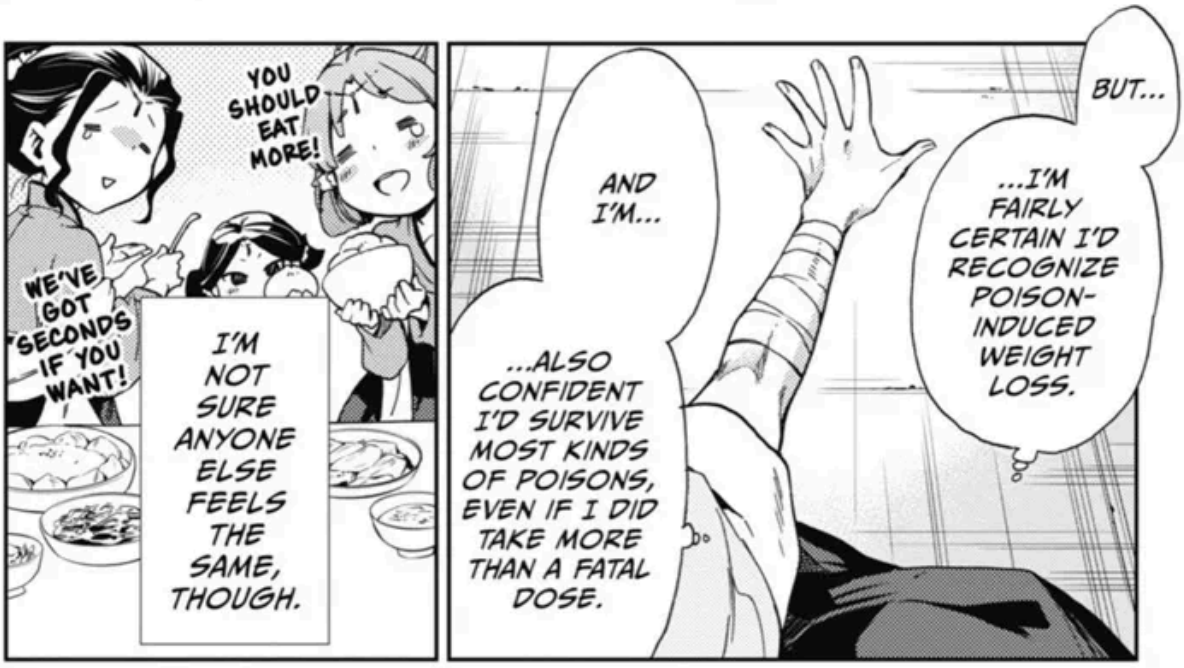
FOOD TASTER SPECIAL ALLOW-ANCE
HERE'S A LITTLE EXTRA FOR YOUR WORK AS A FOOD TASTER.
IT'S A RATHER HAZARDOUS OCCUPATION, AFTER ALL.
FWISH
SWISH
SMILE
THIS WAY, I'LL ALSO GET TO KEEP THE PORTION THAT WAS BEING SENT TO THE MEN WHO KIDNAPPED ME.
...THAT'S ABOUT THE SAME AS MY REGULAR WAGES.

BOW
THANK YOU SO MUCH.
WHISPER
SHE SURE KNOWS HOW TO SWEETEN A RAW DEAL...

DID YOU SEE HER LEFT ARM? IT'S JUST AS I THOUGHT!
SHE TRIES SO HARD TO HIDE IT WITH BANDAGES...
...BUT THOSE WERE SCARS AND BURN MARKS, WEREN'T THEY?
SHE'S ALWAYS SO QUIET TOO... SHE MUSTN'T BE ABLE TO SPEAK PROPERLY ANYMORE.
ABUSED BY HER PARENTS BEFORE BEING SOLD OFF TO THE PALACE...
...AND THEN CONDEMNED TO THE WORK OF A FOOD TASTER...
SOB
SOB
...I PITY THE POOR GIRL!
WAAAH...

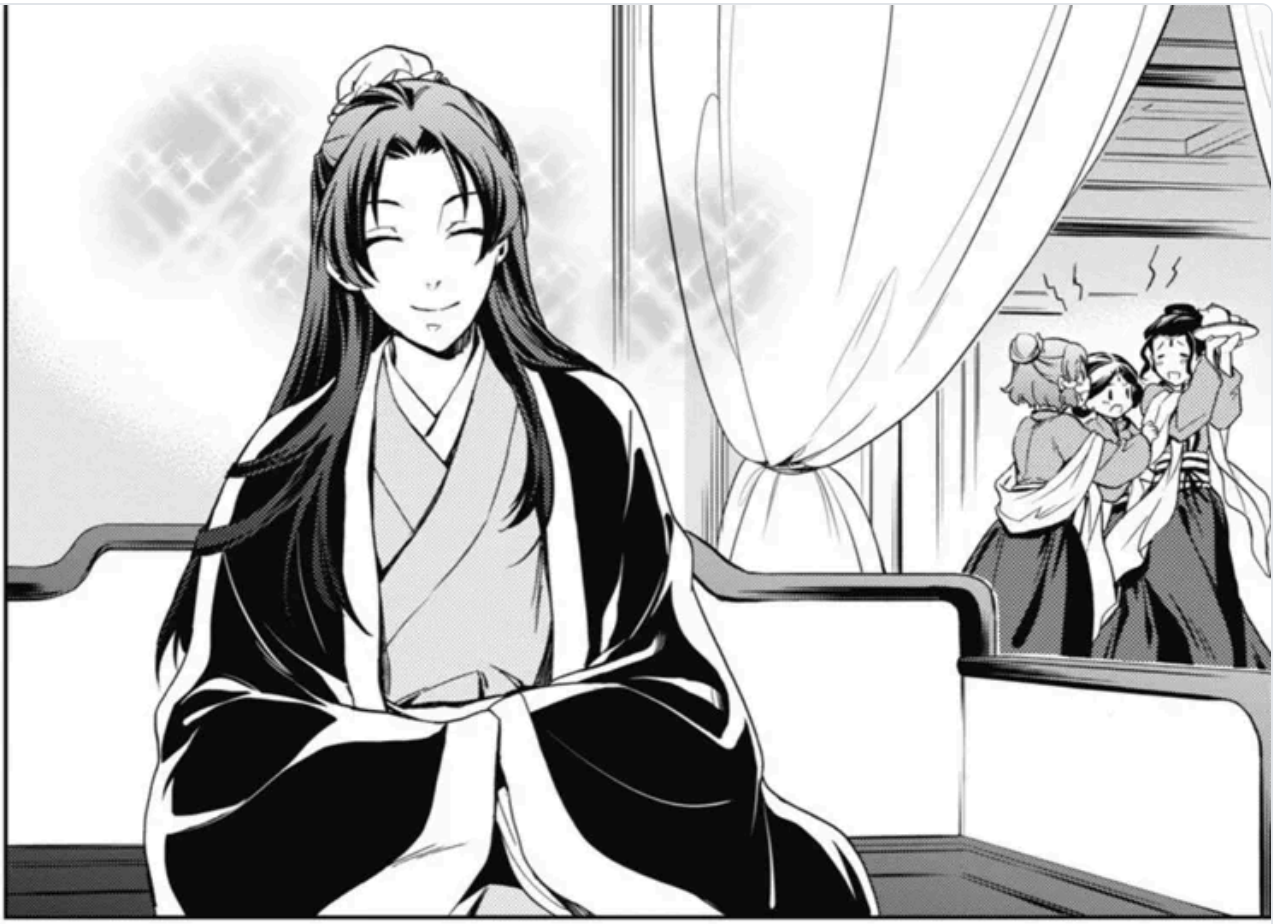
AND EVERY FEW DAYS, I PARTAKE OF THE EMPEROR'S NUTRITIONALLY INVIGORATING DISHES THAT ARE SERVED DURING HIS VISITS. THAT'S IT.
TWO MEALS AND AFTER-NOON TEA.
I'M SUMMONED FOR FOOD TASTING THREE TIMES A DAY.
YOU'RE FREE TO RELAX UNTIL YOU'RE SENT FOR!
IN ADDITION TO THE DISHES I TEST FOR POISONS, MY USUAL MEALS HAVE ALSO GOTTEN A WHOLE LOT FANCIER.
URP.
I'M STARTING TO FEEL LIKE LIVE-STOCK.

A FATAL DOSE OF A POISON IS PRO-PORTIONAL TO THE SIZE OF ONE'S BODY.
THE MORE YOU WEIGH, THE MORE LIKELY YOU ARE TO SURVIVE.
IT'S TRUE ...
...THAT IT'S HARD FOR ME TO TELL IF I'M LOSING WEIGHT DUE TO A POISON SINCE I'M SKINNY TO BEGIN WITH.


YOU SHOULD EAT MORE!
WE'VE GOT SECONDS IF YOU WANT!
I'M NOT SURE ANYONE ELSE FEELS THE SAME, THOUGH.
BUT...
...I'M FAIRLY CERTAIN I'D RECOGNIZE POISON-INDUCED WEIGHT LOSS.
AND I'M...
...ALSO CONFIDENT I'D SURVIVE MOST KINDS OF POISONS, EVEN IF I DID TAKE MORE THAN A FATAL DOSE.

ONCE, I GOT TO EXPERIMENT ON MYSELF TO THE POINT OF MORTIFYING OTHERS...
...AND CONCOCTED A VARIETY OF NEW MEDICINES AS AN APOTH-ECARY...
SULK
...BUT ALL I'VE BEEN ABLE TO BREW SINCE I GOT HERE IS HYDRANGEA TEA.

ITCHING TO EXPERIMENT...
...BUT I'VE NEVER HAD THE RIGHT TOOLS ...
...AND HAVE ALWAYS SHARED A ROOM, SO I'VE RESISTED THE URGE TO CONDUCT QUESTIONABLE EXPERIMENTS.
AND THAT'S ...!
THE PALACE GROUNDS ARE BURSTING WITH PLANTS THAT MIGHT GO INTO MY MEDICINES...
THERE'S SOME...
...HERE TOO!!
THAT'S ...!
!
IF ONLY I HAD A POISONOUS SNAKE OR SOMETHING TO MESS AROUND WITH...
BUT NOW I FINALLY HAVE A ROOM OF MY OWN...
KNOCK KNOCK
MAO-MAO!
I'M GOING TO TURN INTO A PIG AT THIS RATE.
OINK!
ARGH!



...THERE HE GOES, SMILING AT ME AGAIN.

SHOO, NOW!
GO ON!
WHAT CAN I DO FOR YOU TODAY?
CRINGE
ヒク…

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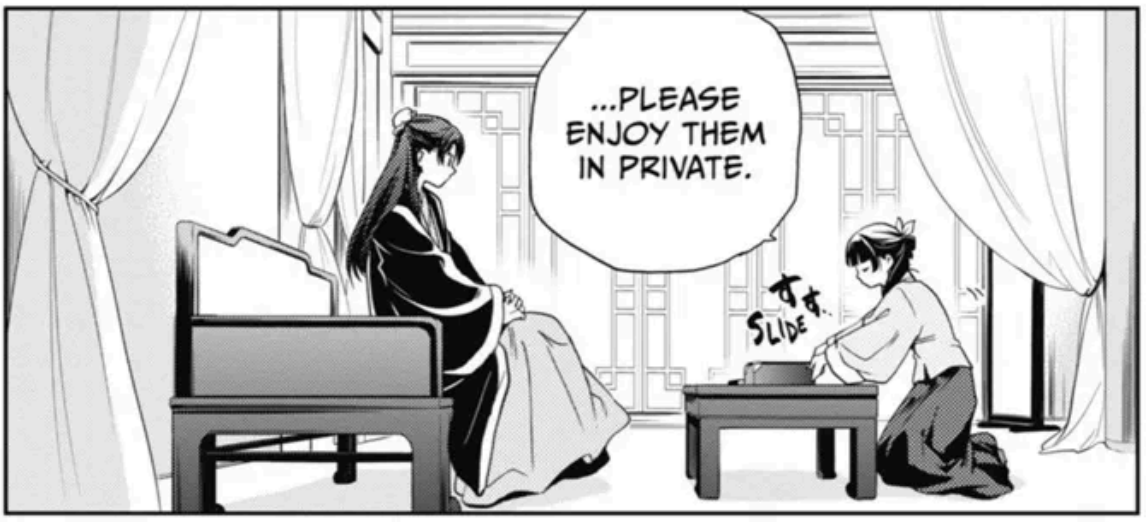
A SOLDIER...?
MIGHT I ASK YOU TO TASTE THEM FOR ME?
I RECEIVED THESE FROM A SOLDIER.
SWISH
ぽ
BAOZI, HMM?
かっ
KAPOP
SNIFF
SNIFF
ふわ
STEAM

THESE CONTAIN AN APHRODISIAC.

THESE ARE HARM-LESS, SO...
YOU CAN TELL WITHOUT EVEN TASTING THEM?


...PLEASE ENJOY THEM IN PRIVATE.
すす...
SLIDE

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I CAN'T SIMPLY EAT THESE, CONSIDERING WHO GAVE THEM TO ME.

I DARESAY YOU CAN EXPECT A VISIT FROM HIM TONIGHT.
IN-DEED.
HEH!
EEEEK!

DID THIS CUR...
...JUST KNOWINGLY TRY TO GET ME TO EAT APHRODISIAC-LACED BUNS?!
CHILL!!
TEE-HEE!
HEE HEE HEE HEE!

CAN I TASK YOU WITH MAKING AN APHRODISIAC FOR ME?
IF THAT'S ALL YOU REQUIRE TODAY, I SHALL TAKE MY LEAVE.
HA! HOW FUNNY!
I HAVE A REQUEST FOR YOU.

!
NO, WAIT.
WHAT'S GOTTEN INTO HIM?
FIRST HE TELLS ME TO TASTE SOMETHING WITH AN APHRODISIAC IN IT, NOW HE WANTS ME TO MAKE HIM ONE?

OOOOH YESSSS!
...MAKING AN APHRODISIAC MEANS...
...FOR-MULATING MEDICINE AGAIN!
EASY, NOW. CONTROL YOUR-SELF.
ACK!
...IMAGINE WHY IN THE WORLD THIS MAN WOULD NEED A LOVE POTION, BUT...
I CAN'T ...

WITH AMPLE TIME, THE RIGHT TOOLS, AND THE NECESSARY INGREDI-ENTS...
...I CAN FULFILL YOUR REQUEST.